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# Socialist and Post-Socialist Functional Elites in East Germany

Axel Salheiser\*

**Abstract:** »Sozialistische und postsozialistische Eliten in Ostdeutschland«. This paper provides a brief overview of elite change and continuity in East Germany as a post-socialist society. To do so, at first, some peculiarities of the former cadre system and elites in Socialist East Germany, i.e. the late German Democratic Republic, are addressed with regard to social structure development and the arrangement of generations. Selected empirical evidence is based on cross-sectoral, longitudinal and cohort analyses and the inspection of prosopographic elite data compiled until the end of the 1980s which deconstruct the myth of a levelled egalitarian Socialist society. In the second part of the paper, elite change and continuity after the political change of 1989/90 is discussed in the context of the transformation of institutions. Inspired by Bourdieu's analytic paradigm, one central thesis on the career survivals, take-offs, and break-downs of East German elites is the continued validity and efficacy of social and cultural capital obtained before the fall of the Wall, most of all formal qualification. Dimensions of vertical social inequality under Socialist rule, such as gender and class background, remain to be decisive until today.

**Keywords:** East Germany, GDR, post-socialism, elites, transformation, German Unification.

## 1. Introduction

Transformation in East Germany has been characterized as a special case of post-socialist societal development (Reißig 1997). In East Germany, rapidly "added" to West Germany, there was a relatively smooth transition with clear-cut directions and goals, there was no partial or iterative "institution shopping", no trial and error of developmental policies or the like as in other CEE countries but a radical 1:1 transfer of the West German framework, i.e. the implementation and consolidation of ready-made institutions, which were merely extended to the five new federal states. A hitherto Socialist society had dissolved over night and was immediately incorporated to a *Western market democracy* which was beyond any historical or contemporary example. However,

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especially this fast way of German Unification led to a conflict between the new and the old social order, namely the persisting structural and socio-economical conditions, in short: the remnants of Socialism, especially the claims, expectations, the biographical experiences, and orientations of East German citizens. One of the central questions was: What would become of the old elites? To what extent would they prove to be compatible with Western market democracy? Post-socialist elite change has been characterized as a development from the ideologically unified cadre nomenclatura of the old Socialist regime to consensually unified but functionally differentiated elites in a posttransformational, democratic society. In Germany, this also included the cultural convergence of elites from different backgrounds and with different biographical experiences. However, many cultural gaps have remained between the East and the West. Differences ceased to exist only in the very youngest generation of Germans who have been born after 1989, who have been entirely socialized in unified Germany and whose everyday life is less affected by the emotional reservations, the biographical experiences or historical burdens of their elders.

In this article an overview of elite change and continuity in East Germany as a post-socialist society is given. To do so, first, some peculiarities of the former cadre system and elites in Socialist East Germany, i.e. the late German Democratic Republic, are addressed with regard to social structure development and the arrangement of generations. I would like to present a small selection of empirical evidence from a research project on GDR elites and societal differentiation which is led by Heinrich Best and associated with the Collaborative Research Centre 580 at Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss the ways and conditions of elite change and continuity after the political change of 1989/90, before I draw some conclusions with regard to the roles and attitudes of East German elites and masses in the process of German Unification.

## 2. GDR Society and Social Structure

To address the issue of elite circulation and reproduction in East German transformation, it is necessary to take a look back at GDR society and social structure as it had developed until the end of the 1980s. 40 years of Socialist societies meant three generations living their lives, being socialized and facing different historical conditions and challenges under Socialist rule that determined their social opportunities and attitudes (cf. Niethammer 1994, Niethammer et al. 1991). *The first generation*, born in the 1920s and 1930s, embraced

the chance of a new start after the experience of National Socialist dictatorship<sup>1</sup> and the Second World War in the formative period of the GDR in the 1950s and early 1960s. Many of them identified with the Socialist project and the promise of a radical break with traditional class society, which included the expropriation and dismissal of old elites and the counter-privileging of the working-class. When in retrospection, political leaders of the GDR have collectively counted their citizens among the “winners of history”, maybe it especially held true for those who were born in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed they experienced high rates of social mobility, due to their activism and enthusiasm they were promoted in the new state of “workers and peasants”, they were granted higher education (via special “Worker’s and Farmer’s Faculties” at the universities, cf. Miethe 2007) and soon they filled the ranks and positions in the cadre system. Also, there were a rapid development of a new economy, as well as remarkable efforts and achievements of raising the catastrophic living standards of the post-war years. This, after a long period of hardships, eventually seemed to compensate for the socialist regime’s non-existing democratic legitimacy and the dictatorial repression especially in the 1950s. One of the most noteworthy accomplishments was the high rates of women employment that became a trademark of the GDR labor system. Women also climbed to subelite-level positions in many societal fields, especially in the civil and social services, but they could rarely made their way to the very top – of course, this glass-ceiling effect is discussed again today with respect to modern Western societies. However, the GDR’s early efforts in “gender equality” were at least among the most progressive ones in *contemporary* international comparison. Due to such achievements and *means of identification* mentioned above, the first generation of GDR citizens was the recruitment pool of the most loyal exponents of nomenclatura.

The second generation, including East Germans born until about 1960, in the phase of economic growth and stability, have mostly been socialized under the Socialist rule and benefitted from the social achievements of the GDR and the advanced system of education and vocational trainings, but later they experienced stagnation and decline in the 1970s and 1980s. Compared to the generation of their parents, they faced far worse career opportunities and a blockage of advancements (cf. Mayer 1994) in the nomenclatura system in which the decisive and attractive positions were mostly occupied by the firstcomers. Women workers still were promoted to engineers or researchers, but despite

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<sup>1</sup> Antifascism belonged to the most important founding myths of the GDR (Ahbe 2007). However, as qualitative and quantitative biographical studies have shown, the collective myth of Antifascism was subliminally thwarted by the fact that a surprisingly high number of mid-level Party functionaries had in fact been members in the Nazi Party in their youth and, thus, later made especially loyal and thankful exponents of the Socialist regime. Cf. Best/Salheiser 2006.

their training, they could hardly become somebody else than the decorative makeshifts in a dysfunctional and inefficient manufacturing industry (Nickel 1993, Ansorg 1999).

Now, social closure was also indicated by the sharper redefinition of social milieus, e.g. the reinvention and diffusion of a conformist petit-bourgeois-orientation in the functional elites and the intelligentsia, who formed a social stratum clearly separated from the working-class. In the second GDR generation, more and more citizens covertly distanced themselves from the regime and its claims, considering all the shortcomings and failures now so obvious.

In terms of social structure development, the third and last generation of the GDR, was the product of a re-established class inequality indicated by high rates of social reproduction. They were only adolescents or young adults on the very verge of system collapse. This generation of grandchildren was raised and indoctrinated in a false and artificial social pastoral. However, they faced a sclerotized society without perspectives – at the end of the day, the Socialist future had been used up. They were of course too young to hold relevant positions in the cadre nomenclatura, but due to their non-encumbrance and their “blank biographies”, their prerequisites for system change were much better than those of their elders.

One of our central research theses is that the increased social inequality in the last period of the GDR already pointed at the direction of post-socialist social differentiation, or in other words, that the Socialist society of real-existing inequality featured a certain kind of connectivity to the West German Capitalist or bourgeois class society. I would like to argue that this connectivity prepared the opportunity structures for post-socialist elite continuity and social inclusion and, accordingly, this has reduced social friction in the process of German Unification (cf. Best et al. 2012).

I'd like to support this argument discussing some empirical findings about the GDR society and its elites. The quantitative analyses of our research project on GDR elite groups and societal development are based on sets of large Process-Generated Data from the GDR cadre administration. One of the most useful and unique datasets is the Zentraler Kaderdatenspeicher (ZKDS)/Central Cadre Database (CCDB), which was established and assembled on behalf of the Council of Ministers of the GDR (Remy 2006). The CCD comprises a vast collection of anonymous individual data. It contains a great variety of information on the job biographies, social backgrounds, societal functions etc. of GDR functional elites, members of the Nomenclatura in administration, economy, the education system, health care, transport, science, culture etc. The Power elites escape the perspective of a quantitative data analysis, because, unfortunately, the large databases of the Party apparatus are no longer available today.

Among the ca. 700,000 records in the database, about 170,000 to 180,000 persons qualify as members of ‘functional elites’ with regard to their position in the organisational hierarchy: including higher executives/directors of com-

panies, or the heads of departments in administration from the low level of regional units up to the government centrals in East Berlin. Although regarded functionaries of the state, the functional elites in economy, science or medicine, or a number of other societal subsystems, could be distinguished from elites of the societal centre of power, that is Party and government nomenclatura, with respect to their political affiliation or party alignment, their levels of qualification, and their social backgrounds. In general, not only the social structure of the GDR but Socialist elites themselves showed an remarkable extent of horizontal and vertical differentiation, even though ideology continuously proclaimed and propagated the illusion of social equality and collective unity.

A working-class background and profound party alignment, such as Party membership and honorary posts in the Party apparatus, became the supreme prerequisite and asset for Socialist elites. The very power elite, e.g., the high-ranking officials of the Communist state Party SED and the leadership of the state, formed a caste-like stratum that regarded and staged themselves as the avant-garde of the Proletariate. Their legitimacy was founded on the historical landmark of the revolution, their ideological claims, their own personal history of persecution by Fascism or, at least, by the symbolical inheritance of the revolutionary forces of the Working-Class.

In fact, within the power elites there actually was a clearly dominant representation of persons with a working-class background, but the share of false and favourable categorizations of occupations of fathers, was, roughly estimated 10-20% (cf. Salheiser 2003). And despite the official equality policy, at least one half of the working-class, namely women, stayed blatantly under-represented within the party and government top. Given the modest average level of qualification, especially among the older power elites, political affiliation and commitment to Communist ideology could be identified as the central criteria of allocation to the power elite.

However, in the field of functional elites, criteria of personnel allocation and status distribution get into focus that were not altogether incongruous to the respective modes in Western societies (cf. Salheiser 2006). Top-level functional elites, for instance in economy or science, typically boasted a “double qualification” – besides their professional assets (like vocational trainings, academic education etc.) they had often participated in courses at central and regional Party schools and even held degrees in so-called Social Sciences which had been obtained by studies in Marxism-Leninism on a pseudo-academic level. Such political qualifications were of high symbolic value and could be considered a means of status affirmation rather than a necessary precondition to climb on the career ladder. Advanced party schoolings strengthened and underlined the elevated nomenclatura status (Salheiser 2009). As regression analysis indicates, such political assets were, however, non-complementary for functional qualification and professional aptitude, or expertise. In this aspect, Socialist functional elites, commonly referred to as the

Technocrats, were in some way in between Western elites with whom they partly shared a professional orientation, and the Socialist *power* elites, or the *Ideologists*, whom they were separated from because many of the latter solely relied on their party affiliation and “owed everything to the Party”, as *Pierre Bourdieu* (1991) pointed out.

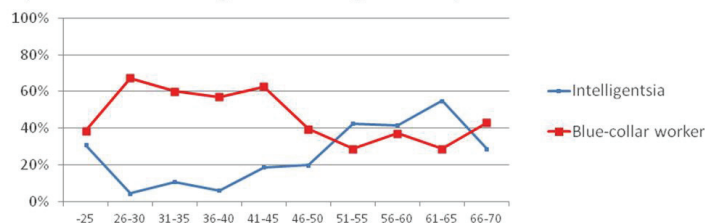
GDR’s functional elites yielded no political power, but nevertheless, they ran the Socialist society. Compared to the average workers, or lower white-collar employees, those cadres were characterized by the privileged access to societal resources and informal networks, they earned higher incomes and had a petit-bourgeois life-style including distinct patterns of consumption and leisure activities. Also, given their political loyalty, many of them were allowed to travel to Capitalist countries which was an enormous privilege in comparison with the average citizens. Very important, cadres were able to offer their children the access to higher education and cadre positions, which established a tendency of self-reproduction of elites visible on the aggregate level (Best 2012, Best et al. 2012, Salheiser 2010, Salheiser 2009).

Figure 1: Tendencies of Self-Reproduction in Socialist Functional Elites

Social Background of Cadres from Economy

	Total %	CEOs	Division Managers	Small Company Directors	Heads of Dept.
Intelligentsia	6.7	7.3	9.5	5.4	6.6
blue collar	59.3	63.7	57.8	58.3	59.9
white collar	19.2	18.5	20.7	20.9	17.7
others	14.7	10.5	12.1	15.4	15.8

Development of Social Backgrounds among University Teachers



Source: CCDB 1989, Collaborative Research Centre 580 (Jena)

This was partly due to the traditional cultural affinity to education (Best 2005a) and status aspiration in the bourgeois or intelligentsia milieu but also due to another curious effect of self-selection: In the last period of the GDR, persons from workers’ families were rather bound to becoming workers themselves due to cultural imprinting and the better monetary incentives. It was more attractive for many to be a worker instead of a better-trained or even academically quali-

fied employee because a white-collar employee earned less than a worker or just little more – but he or she was expected to take greater functional and social responsibilities at the same time. Of course, this was contra productive to social mobility and affirmed the rigid status order. Since the late 1970s, social inequality in the education and occupation system had increased considerably so self-reproduction of the intelligentsia became an important issue of arcane social science and even was discreetly addressed by GDR sociologists in official publications (cf. Lötsch 1988).

With distinctive vertical social differentiation (Best 2003), rigid status order and reduced social mobility in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, and while the economic crisis and the consumption deficits became more and more dramatic, pressure on the regime constantly grew. In addition, the Politbureau rejected any democratic reforms, quite contrary, it even reinforced repression. Eventually, GDR had turned into a society of inequality and injustice, and, of course, this fundamentally questioned Socialist rule and Socialist elites on the eve of the 1989 revolution.

### 3. Elite Change and Societal Integration in East German Transformation

In 1990 it was evident that the GDR left a dysfunctional economy, an inefficient and excessive bureaucracy, non-existing democratic and civil institutions, costly institutions of social welfare and social education thoroughly deligitimised by the ideological burden and authoritarian malpractice. All of this clearly demanded drastic measures and a complete restart in the most societal subsystems which caused the disruption of biographies as a mass experience and high rates of unemployment in the general population. The restructuring of East German industry delivered one of the most striking examples for this profound structural break (cf. Gergs et. al. 1997, Gergs and Pohlmann 1999). No doubt, in the first place, the societal renewal demanded the dismissal of old elites who had personified, run and empowered the Socialist regime even beyond the centre of power (the Communist state party and rulers of the state) and also below the very tip of the *cadre pyramid*.

Former GDR dissidents and the *victims of state crimes* have been underlining ever since the political change in 1989/1990 that the *supportive personnel of the GDR regime* cannot be reduced to the highest echelons of the SED party or to the State Security apparatus but, that GDR society, in fact, would not have been kept alive without a much broader foundation of collective agents and social strata who had conformed and aligned for both ideological and opportunistic reasons, those who had come to an arrangement with the system. But in unified Germany, there was no opportunity for such a complicated, discriminating evaluation that would have surmounted a historical debate and led to practical consequences of social exclusion. The social exclusion of a broader strata

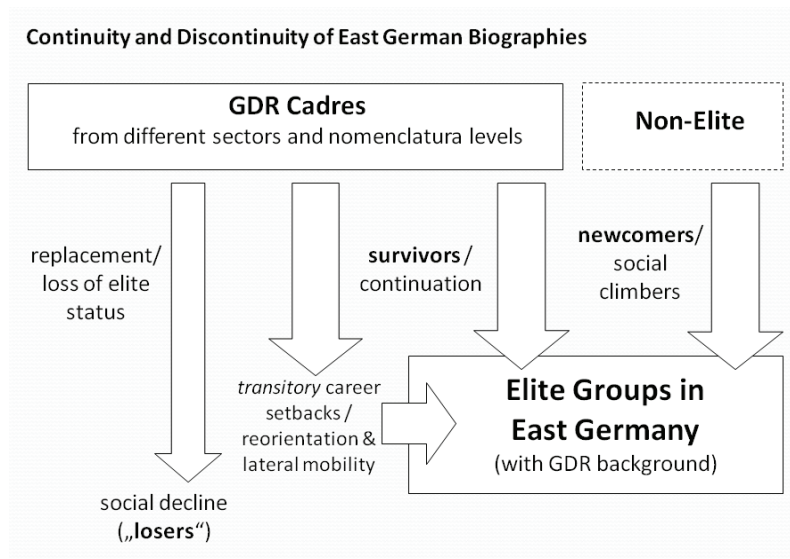


tum of former regime followers – the Socialist cadres and sub-elites in general – would have been *maybe for the sake of justice* but very certainly *for the price* of social peace.

Roughly speaking, exclusion was completed after the higher representatives, such as the Party secretaries, the local state bureaucrats, the Director Generals (CEOs) of the state-owned companies, etc. had taken their hats and been sent into pension, prison, or both. The most prominent exponents of the *power elite of the old regime were immediately ousted from their positions, and with no substantial backing in the population, they were left socially marginalized in post-socialist Germany.*

If one focuses on functional elites, one of the starting conditions of transformation was that the *very top level* of government offices and administrative units of the GDR state in East Berlin abruptly became redundant in united Germany because their West German counterpart institutions took over their function. Only a strictly limited number of higher employees of the East German state administration could remain in position after the restructuring of institutions. For instance, the complete Diplomatic Corps of the GDR was considered obsolete, so all those cadres were dismissed *even though* there were highly qualified and experienced country specialists among them (cf. Gebauer 2011).

Figure 2: Modes of Elite Transition



On the level of the re-established federal states, the former GDR county administrations (Räte der Bezirke) made way for a smaller number of state gov-

ernments which also meant a considerable cutback of positions. Due to the political and ideological taintedness of the mid-to-top-level cadres, there was little personal continuity. As a rule, immediately after unification, West Germans entered the new East German offices and filled the ranks of head of departments or referees since they were better qualified for and substantially experienced with democratic and bureaucratic institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union than East Germans themselves. For a substantial part of the East German people, the *elite import* from the West was associated with *takeover* and *paternalism*. The term “colonialisation” was coined for the transition and especially with regard to the elite change.

At a closer look, the colonialisation thesis was much too lump-sum an allegation that was popularized due to the psychological effect of the visibility of some holders of elite positions, especially the most prominent ones, in public media. In fact: West Germans came as *counsellors of the transition*, likewise they were grandfathers of democratization and economic restructuring; including prominent West German politicians such as Thuringian Prime Minister, Bernhard Vogel or the highly influential top manager, Lothar Späth (another former West German Prime Minister) in the state of Thuringia. Such high ranking politicians have made a start for the new Eastern Federal states of Germany, after some years they stepped back and passed their offices to native East German partisans. Today, East Germany’s Prime Ministers are East Germans, and most members of the state governments and the representative elites are “natives”, too (cf. Edinger 2009, Best 2005b).

On the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy and the elite system, there really has been a considerable personnel import from the West, but not a drastic removal, extrusion and marginalization of East Germans (cf. Hornbostel 2000). The two key criteria of career continuity were, first, the former affiliation with the old Socialist regime and, second, the qualification, ability and willingness to re-embark on respective post-socialist careers. Much more important than biographical or affective closeness to the Socialist regime, the question for the intelligentsia was about the compatibility and convertibility of professional experiences and career assets (cf. Hoerning 2007).

In marked contrast to the cutback of personnel on the central levels, on the lower levels of regional and municipal administration, in economy, and other societal subsystems, functional elites were offered diverse modes of inclusion, dependent on their qualification and their willingness and flexibility to adapt themselves. If they had not been directly and overtly involved in oppressive or unlawful actions of the state, if they were not politically tainted, they could very well remain in their positions, or achieved successful lateral mobility on the job market. Several empirical studies have produced evidence of this elite reproduction (Diewald, Goedicke and Mayer 2006, Diewald and Pollmann-Schult 2009), with an eminent shift from political to “meritocratic” principles of personnel allocation and career advancements (Solga 2009).

With little exceptions, formal qualifications granted by GDR's higher educational institutions, such as university diplomas or doctoral degrees, have been acknowledged by Federal German law or converted to equivalent qualifications.

A good example for subelites with academic training are the teachers. Teachers from GDR primary schools had often been qualified on special Teacher Schools on sub-academic level. Those vocational trainings did not necessarily demand university-entrance school diplomas or A-Levels. After 1990, those teachers could mostly keep their jobs, became civil servants according to Federal German law – with high payments equal to university-trained teachers – and accordingly, could raise their socio-economic status.

Due to the comparatively high level of the GDR system of vocational training, many problems of adaption could quite smoothly be helped with advanced on-the-job training. Apart from very specific cases (such as accountants specialized on socialist business, or Communist Youth leaders at schools) there was almost no global incompatibility of qualifications.

Thus, if former members of the old functional elites could not embark on post-socialist careers, it was mostly due to the overall crisis on the job markets which likewise (or even more) concerned to non-elite members, e.g. workers. Restructuring of industry and labor markets had its deepest impact on the stratum of blue-collar employees on lower skill levels, or service personnel. To give an instructive example, in a formerly large but now rapidly shrinking industrial company, the cook, the plumber or the lorry driver were soon to go, while the heads of department formed the new board of executive officers. Cadres of large industrial combines turned into managers of small to medium-sized businesses, those who were bought by West German investors but also a considerable share of enterprises following the model of managerial ownership (Pohlmann and Gergs 1997, Pohlmann et al. 1996, Pohlmann and Schmidt 1996). It has frequently been underlined that this conversion became possible due to the technocratic orientation of GDR's economic elites that proved compatible with the demands of market economy (cf. Schmidt 2005, Best 2005a, Salheiser 2005). Since generational shift is delayed, substantial parts of the East German management remains to be staffed with former GDR cadres until today (Martens 2008).

To give another example, in 1990, physicians from the GDR's state-owned medical care centers became physicians in their private practices, very often they kept their staff and even worked in the same buildings.

All in all, East German former functional elite and subelite members had good opportunities to convert their social and cultural capital. As white-collar employees on the higher professional levels they actively participated in the transformation. Most of them have not been left behind.

Higher ranking personnel from the GDR military and the State Security apparatus, especially those who boasted no adequate civil qualifications, had it

comparatively worse. A former officer from the Engineer Corps of the dissolved National People's Army might have become a free architect or got employed in a construction company, but a former Airforce pilot or a former State Security officer were very likely to eke out a living as a watchman, a door-keeper or a janitor. Among the declassified former cadres, many older persons had it easier because they were to become pensioners very soon – and average pensions were raised considerably after Unification –, while the middle generation had to re-orientate and struggle for repositioning in unified Germany.

It is remarkable that most of the new representative and functional elites in East Germany were former members of the lower GDR nomenclatura or intelligentsia, or came from marginalized bourgeois milieus, rather than having a distinguished dissidents' or reformers' background. After the short revolutionary period of grass-roots democracy, there was a rapid return to the dominance of elite-powered political action and established parties. This also ended the factual influence of GDR dissidents and civil rights activists, who henceforth kept symbolic functions and a cultural salience in society but have had almost no political influence any longer. Ironical enough, they first dismissed their oppressors, then they disappeared. Prominent exponents such as Federal President, Joachim Gauck, who was elected in March 2012, are remarkable exceptions.

When inspecting scientific use files of the German Federal Pension Insurance (Rentenversicherung Bund), it becomes visible that highly qualified or academically trained persons who belonged to the second generation of the GDR population and whose social profiles closely match the traits of the former lower nomenclatura or socialist intelligentsia, earned significantly better than average in the 1990s which can be considered an evidence of post-socialist career continuation, or stability of their acquired social statuses. The persistence of former GDR elite or subelite statuses is also expressed in a correlation matrix (cf. fig. 3) that was computed after statistically matching CCDB personnel mass data from GDR cadre administration with post-1990 panel survey data. However, Ronald Gebauer discusses further empirical findings about post-socialist career continuity and relevant mathematical problems of Statistical Matching in his contribution to this volume.

Roughly, there has been a *transmogrification* and *conservation* of important elements of the Socialist social structure (cf. Datenreport 2011). Due to their kept social status, it is not exaggerated to say that the majority of the GDR intelligentsia and the lower nomenclatura belongs to the "winners of the transformation". With the elements of the former GDR structure of social inequality, modes of *intergenerational status tradition* have also been continued across the societal change.

Figure 3: Continuity of Cadre Biographies? Elite Positions before and after 1989 Statistical Matching of GDR Data (CCB) and SOEP Panel Survey Data  
Correlations: Somer's D (symmetrical)  $n=1.033$

	Position 1989 (CCD)	Position 1990 (SOEP)	Position in 1991	Position in 1992	Position in 1993	Position in 1994
<b>Cadre Position in GDR (1= earliest entry)</b>	.276**	.245**	.163**	.174**	.170**	n.s.
<b>Cadre Position in GDR (entry 2)</b>	.352**	.352**	.235**	.244**	.266**	n.s.
<b>Cadre Position in GDR (entry 3)</b>	.451**	.420**	.201**	.237**	.239**	n.s.
Position 1989 (CCD)		.791**	.481**	.452**	.428**	.270**
Position 1990 (SOEP)	.791**		.622**	.515**	.489**	.298**

Among the top elites, yet there has been little evidence for the coming of the East Germans on the national level, prominent politicians such as Chancellor Merkel being the rare exception. Among the largest German stock-holding companies, of which many are present in East Germany with production facilities, not a single one is led by a CEO born and socialized in East Germany. In cultural elites, the East Germans are much more present, especially if we take a look at prominent actors, show stars, or sportswomen and sportsmen.

#### 4. Conclusion

Has been transformation a success story? And if yes, for whom? After two decades, unified Germany features elites in the East and the West continuously converging towards each other with regard to their attitudes and their social composition. East German elites, by career continuity and social self-reproduction, can be counted among the winners of transformation. But, at the same time, there is a growing mass-elite divergence. German Transformation has been and still is a project of integration. I'd like to argue that integration of the elites was successful, while thorough integration of the overall population might still be at stake especially in the under-developed jerkwater regions of East Germany, that are still ridden with structural deficits. In fact, there *has* been a visible modernization of East German economy and infrastructure, and some prosperous cities and regions that stand out as beacons of successful transformation. However, in colloquial talk, the Eastern states have quite commonly been referred to as *that one region with great highways and shopping*

*malls but without enough jobs and without future perspectives.* Among the East German population, this has caused a deep disorientation and resignation that could not be overcome until today. The East German discontent is also expressed in surveys that reveal a rather low satisfaction with democracy and an *irritating* high level of authoritarian and ethnocentric attitudes (Schmitt and Wolff 2011). Characteristically, those native East Germans whose social commitment fosters the underdeveloped civil society, and who actively engage themselves against extremism and xenophobia, often share the biographic background of socialist cadres, i.e. they once belonged to sub-to-medium echelons of the functional elites of the GDR (cf. Corsten 2005).

In 1989/90, many East German intellectuals articulated their dissent and scepticism about the swiftness of complete transition to a merely enlarged FRG, while the masses readily wholeheartedly embraced the Unification and the symbols of newly found national identity.

Ever since, the risks and costs of transformation have fostered negative attitudes that Helmut Wiesen­thal also described as a cognitive bias, or reservation of East German elites (Wiesen­thal 2009, 10). National union and mutual approximation had especially been addressed in 1990 and the first years after, but cultural gaps and cultural separation between the East and the West have remained. Differences ceased to exist only in the very youngest generation of Germans who have been born after 1989, who have been entirely socialized in unified Germany and whose everyday life is less affected by the emotional reservations, the biographical experiences or historical burdens of their elders. Nowadays, East German elites – as decision makers, communicators and role models – bear great responsibility to safeguard the project of Unification. Finding adequate responses to the challenges of transformation and posttransformation remains the central task of Germany's united elites.

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